

The Faroe Islands Vote for Change

A reflective analysis of the 2015 Faroese election

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On 1st September 2015, the people of the Faroe Islands (36,458 registered voters in a population of 49,469) went to the polls in an election that drew more foreign attention than usual. High interest at home was shown by a turnout of 88.8% and the results were dramatic beyond expectation. Most obviously, a right-centre ruling coalition was displaced by a left-centre grouping which advocated a number of bold policy changes. These included explicitly reviving progress towards independence from the Danish sovereign power. But the election results also hinted at more profound shifts developing within Faroese society, notably on gender and sexual issues. This short report tells the story in more detail and asks: what could or should happen now?

Background

The Faroese parliament (Løgting) has 33 members, implying that in order to successfully pass legislation a government should command at least 17 votes.¹ Given the multiplicity of parties whose positions vary not just on a right-to-left axis but also in terms of their stance on union versus independence, coalitions are inevitable. Conservative and centrist parties with a mostly anti-independence profile did well in the last (2011) elections; for the next four years, a coalition of the liberal-conservative Union Party and the conservative People's Party (8 seats each), plus the smaller Centre (2 seats) and Self-rule (1 seat) parties ruled the Faroes.² The programme of this coalition included trying to restore certain closer ties to Denmark although this proved impractical in many respects.³

In 2013, the Self-rule Party had to leave the coalition when its minister was implicated in a scandal over plans for a major sub-sea tunnel. By 2015, the contagion had spread as the Prime Minister himself – Kaj Leo Holm Johannesen of the Union Party – was accused of improper involvement in the same scheme. After the publication of an independent report confirming he had at times misled parliament, a no-confidence resolution on 4th August gained 14 votes, thus falling short of a decisive majority. This shortfall occurred because many MPs, including some from the government parties, abstained from voting.

Initially, Johannesen shrugged off calls for an early election, but then – some five weeks later – he announced that one would take place on the 1st September. He continued to argue, however, that he had done nothing wrong, and chose to stay on as the chairman of his party and a top candidate in the election campaign.

¹ For more on the Faroese parliament and politics see the government website at: http://www.logting.fo/files/File/Faldari%202012/faldari_EN_2012%20smal.pdf

² Varying English translations are found for the Faroese party names. Here we have used the simplest and most direct equivalents, but please note that official usage may be different.

³ For details see Alyson J.K. Bailes, 'Independence Politics in the Faroe Islands: An election to watch', Scottish Global Forum, 4th August 2015, at: <http://www.scottishglobalforum.net/bailes-faroese-elections-2015.html>

Election Issues

With the announcement of the election, much of the unfolding debate focused on the Johannesen government's economic and social programmes which had generally favoured the richer elements in society, and caused problems for many with limited incomes. Measures which had been implemented included a controversial new method of pre-taxing pensions, introduced in order to boost state revenues in the short-term. The conservative parties argued that such measures were necessary to provide long-term stability for a Faroese economy which is overwhelmingly dependent on fish sales and a Danish subsidy for some 7% of its public income (=4% of GDP).

The parties previously in opposition also stressed their concern for long-term economic viability. However they depicted social justice, reform, and guided economic development as the best road towards it. Among areas highlighted for reform was the way in which fishing rights and earnings from the fishing industry are handled; this is a hot political issue in Iceland, where the opposition likes to depict the political right-wing as captive to the selfish interests of big operators. The argument of Faroese conservatives was, and remains, that operators need the assurance of long-term rights to gain optimum results, and thus support the whole economy and society. Reform of current arrangements, they argue, only brings uncertainty.

Issues of a more values-related kind were also raised in the campaign. Faroese society is generally seen as more conservative (with a small 'c') than the Nordic norm, *inter alia* because of the strong role of the Lutheran church. When Iceland's last PM, Jóhanna Sigurðadóttir, visited the Faroes, one Faroese MP ostentatiously boycotted an official dinner because Sigurðadóttir was in a lesbian marriage. However mainstream opinion has been shifting and by 2013, opinion polls suggested over 60% support for allowing civil (not church) marriages between same-sex partners⁴. The Progress Party supported this idea in its campaign, as well as calling for stronger roles for women in general.

The Election Process and Results

In national elections, the Faroes are treated as a single constituency where each party presents a list of its proposed MPs. The voter can dedicate his/her vote to one preferred candidate, or simply vote for the party. When a government is formed, the PM and any elected MPs chosen as ministers have to leave parliament and are replaced by others on the party list.

Opinion polls in the spring and summer of 2015 found a clear shift of support towards the opposition parties, namely: (a) the Social Democrats, (b) two parties ('Republic' and 'New Self-rule') with pro-independence platforms, and (c) the Progress Party which has split off from the Union Party, with a *laissez-faire* economic stance but more socially liberal and independence-minded. The last poll before the elections suggested, however, that the swing away from the three ruling coalition parties would be weaker, and might still leave them with enough seats to retain power.

The results emerging on 1–2 September confounded that prediction. In fact, there was a strong swing away from the coalition and towards parties with Leftist, liberal, and pro-independence positions. Here is a comparison of the 2011 and 2015 results:

⁴ See Norðlýsið (Faroese news agency), 8th September 2013, at: <http://nordlysid.fo/81+av+nordstremoyingum+eru+fyrri+samkyndum+hjunabandi.html>

PARTY (with Faroese name)	2011 Seats	% of vote	2015 Seats	% of vote
Union <i>Sambandsflokkurin</i>	8	24.7	6	18.8
People's <i>Fólkaflokkurin</i>	8	22.5	6	18.9
Social Democrats <i>Javnaðarflokkurin</i>	6	17.8	8	25.1
New Self-rule <i>Nýtt Sjálvstýri</i>	1	4.2	2	4.0
Republic <i>Tjóðveldi</i>	6	18.3	7	20.8
Progress <i>Framsókn</i>	2	6.3	2	7.0
Centre <i>Miðflokkurin</i>	2	6.2	2	5.5

The pattern of 'personal votes' was also striking. The former PM's votes fell by two thirds to 601, and he was not even the most popular name on the Union Party list. He has since announced that he is stepping down from the Party leadership. Aksel V. Johannesen of the Social Democrats (no relation) drew the highest personal total with 2,405, confirming his legitimacy as the next government leader.

Høgni Hoydal, leader of the Republic Party, gained the second highest total. But the third highest, 1,021, went to a woman in the Social Democrats, Sonja Jógvansdóttir, who is a self-declared lesbian with a charismatic and colourful personality, given to wearing bow ties. She is in an established relationship with a female former minister, from the Republic Party. Overall, and after adjustments for the selection of ministers, women have won a third of the seats in the new Faroese parliament – an all-time record.

Forming the Government

On 15th September, it was announced that agreement had been reached to form a three-way governing coalition of the Social Democrat, Republic, and Progress parties. Under Aksel Johannesen as PM, ministries have been shared out as follows:

(Social Democrat)	Rigmor Dam*	Culture and Education
	Eyðgunn Samuelsen*	Social Affairs
	Henrik Old	Infrastructure
(Republic)	Høgni Hoydal	Fisheries, Deputy Prime Minister
	Kristina Háfoss*	Finance
	Sirið Stenberg*	Health and Interior
(Progress)	Poul Michelsen	Industry and Foreign Affairs

It is significant to note that those asterisked are women. Whilst a tally of four female ministers out of seven would be unremarkable elsewhere in Northern Europe, this is a major breakthrough for the Faroes. Aksel Johannesen also makes a relatively young PM at 43. The other coalition leaders, Høgni Hoydal (Republic) and Poul Michelsen (Progress), are 49 and 71 years old respectively.

The posts given to Hoydal and Michelsen reflect their status as party leaders and are in fields critical for the new government programme. They also grant important external roles to both. The designation of a distinct Foreign Ministry under Michelsen can also be seen as a clear step away from previous practice: the former PM Kaj Leo Holm Johannesen (with his pro-union programme) had brought the foreign affairs staff into the PM's office and handled diplomatic issues himself.

Plans on Self-rule and Independence

The bulk of the new 7-page government programme – published on 14th September – is a catalogue of planned reforms in all areas of the economy and society, ranging from very precise and time-bound initiatives to general aspirations.⁵ Specific measures on gender rights include efforts for equal pay and new measures against stalking; however, there is nothing on gay marriage or LGBT issues generally (it is fair to note that 'women's issues' come up in other parts of the programme such as kindergarten provision, health reforms and support for young families.)

The sections on the constitutional status of the Faroes and on foreign affairs are among those that set out brief goals with little solid explanation. However this does not make them any less sensational. Regarding the sovereignty issue, the new government promises to go ahead with drafting a new Faroese constitution, something that the Danes have warned against but which the previous government had actually also backed.⁶ Two other points, however, are more novel and (for many) provocative:

- To first 'freeze' and then reduce the amount of the Danish financial subsidy;
- To hold a referendum in the Faroes on the new constitution, as early as 2017.

More generally, the government undertakes to shift further areas of competence from the Danish sovereign to the Faroes' own control, thus stretching the present degree of autonomy and – as many would see it – further moving the Faroes down the road towards full independence from Denmark.

Aside from reinstating a separate foreign affairs portfolio, the new Faroese government is also forthright about its diplomatic plans. The general aim is to have the Faroes present at the table at any time when international matters vital for the nation are being discussed. The Faroes' overseas representations will be asked to upgrade their existing work and to deliver tangible results (there are five such missions at present).⁷ The Faroes will seek separate, independent membership in the Nordic Council, EFTA, WTO, and the International Olympic Committee, and will strengthen its role in Arctic cooperation. Further aims include a Free Trade Agreement with the EU and improved trade relations with other states.

⁵ Available (only in Faroese) at: <http://www.foroyalandsstyri.fo/landsstyrid/samgonguskjalid/>
The publication date of 14th September is meaningful in the Faroes because that was the date of the 1946 independence referendum (see below).

⁶ This happened most recently in 2011 when the Danish PM warned that proposed Faroese changes would go beyond the point where the Faroes could be kept within the overall Danish constitution, and were tantamount to an independence declaration. Kaj Leo Holm Johannesen did not accept this.

⁷ Brussels, Copenhagen, London, Moscow and Reykjavík, see: <http://www.government.fo/>

Where and Whither Now?

Large political shifts in any country bring turbulence and a degree of uncertainty over how sustainable those shifts are. Signs that all would not be plain sailing for the new Faroese government came in the very first days of the new parliament. Sonja Jógvansdóttir announced she would be leaving the Social Democrat (SD) party in protest at the failure to include the legalization of same-sex marriage in the coalition's programme for government (the SDs were seen as mainly responsible for this, as their extensive membership is divided on the issue). Jógvansdóttir said, however, that she would support the rest of the government's programme as an Independent MP, and later offered to sign a formal undertaking to this end.

Surprises can come both ways. A day after Jógvansdóttir's announcement, Annika Olsen left the People's Party and on 17th September accepted the chairmanship of a powerful parliamentary committee as inducement to join the governing Progress Party. Just days later, she left that party to be an Independent; she has subsequently taken absence of leave in order to deal with stress. Meanwhile, the two members of New Self-rule Party offered a 'voting pact' whereby they would support the coalition without actually joining it. The end result is that the government parties end up with three guaranteed supporters on top of their own 16 votes, thus giving them a working – if not a formal or unassailable – majority.

As to further uncertainties, there is speculation about how the three party leaders in the coalition – all strong personalities – will get on together in the medium to longer term. All have had to accept programme compromises that are painful for at least some of their supporters, and which could hurt further as details of the currently vague policy pledges emerge. It is not unknown for Faroese coalitions to shed members during their term; indeed, the former government ended as a three-party coalition after a smaller party left. The new parliamentary arithmetic would not let any two of the existing three partners maintain a majority together, though it could conceivably work if (for instance) New Self-rule replaced the Republic Party.

There are obvious, larger questions about the viability of the overall government programme with its provocative combination of left-liberal reforms and bold steps towards independence. It places powerful constituencies like the fishery owners and other traditional élites on the defensive, and they are not lacking in tools to retaliate.

In general economic terms, reconciling a proactive welfare, reform and development policy with building a robust and competitive economy long-term would be a challenge for any government. However the risks are higher for the Faroes where balancing the books depends on external factors – especially the sea products market – which are beyond the small nation's control. In the past year, the Faroes have benefited hugely from the Ukraine-related sanctions imposed upon Russia; specifically the ban of fish imports from EU and NATO countries. This ban does not apply to the Faroes which opted to stay out of the EU when Denmark joined in 1973.⁸ Greatly increased quantities of salmon, including some allegedly brought into the Faroes from elsewhere, have been sold to Russia at above-average prices. But how long can such good fortune be relied upon?

⁸ 'Faroe Islands Boom by Selling Salmon to Russia', *Wall Street Journal*, 20th February 2015, at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/faeroe-islands-boom-by-selling-salmon-to-russia-1424483776>

Of particular interest to watchers in Scotland, Catalonia and elsewhere will be how the coalition's sovereignty-related plans prosper. There are two parties in this constitutional game (or three if we include possible implications for Greenland), and thus far the Danish PM has sent just a minimal message of welcome to his new Faroese opposite number. Even if the Faroes' right to choose their time for seeking eventual independence is beyond dispute, any practical forward step – including changes to the Danish subsidy – would of course require Tórshavn and Copenhagen to work together, or at least talk. Faroese applications to international bodies may start under a cloud if the sovereign neighbour opposes them, and other nations which oppose separatism may not be sympathetic to emerging Faroese aspirations on the world stage.⁹

In the end, as befits an advanced democracy, the Faroese people will make up their own minds. They will have the final say in the 2017 constitutional referendum, if it is held as planned. In 1946, an initial post-war referendum on independence showed a small majority in favour (50.74% to 49.26%), but those aspirations led nowhere because of Danish reluctance.¹⁰ Polls since have tended to show a continuing fine balance, and it does not necessarily follow that someone who favours Faroese independence will want to take a decisive step towards it at any given time.

How real and how decisive the Faroese tide of change may be, both on this point and in regard to gender and civic freedoms, is something that only time can show. But it will continue to make the Faroese case a fascinating one to watch.

⁹ The Faroes are already a full member of NAMMCO, a whaling-related group, and associated member of the International Maritime Organization and some other UN agencies. They have the right to make their own fisheries agreements. It should not be assumed that Denmark will automatically oppose Faroese aspirations. It has been friendly (so far) towards Faroese efforts to gain a more distinct voice in the Nordic and Arctic Councils.

¹⁰ Further details at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faroese_independence_movement